What Do Voters Want From Their Local MP?

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Abstract

This article summarises the findings from a study of what constituents want from their local Member of Parliament (MP).[1] We make use of a survey technique known as conjoint analysis, wherein we present a national sample of British voters with profiles of hypothetical MPs who vary randomly in their characteristics, activities and behaviour. We find that voters like MPs who are independent from the party line and who do not focus exclusively on national policy work. MPs' gender and experience matter far less to constituents. Overall, voters want a Parliament made up of strong-minded MPs who see their role as that of a constituency representative. This has important implications for parliamentary democracy in Britain.

Keywords: constituency service; Members of Parliament; rebellion; representation; survey experiments

The job of a Member of Parliament (MP) does not come with a clear description of tasks and duties. Indeed, research carried out in the UK and elsewhere has consistently found that parliamentary representatives differ, often quite substantially, in how they interpret their role and carry out their work.[2] For example, MPs vary in how they decide to allocate time and effort to various activities. Some parliamentarians are known for being policy specialists who are highly active in parliament; others direct their attention away from Westminster and toward their constituents, working assiduously on casework or vociferously backing local campaigns. Similarly, when it comes to party discipline, party whips would agree that some

MPs deserve gold stars for model behaviour while other MPs often speak out or vote in ways that go against the party line.

But while we may have a good idea as to how MPs choose to fulfil their role, we have a less clear picture as to how British voters want them to do so. This is important for two reasons. First, if we do not know what voters want from their MP, we cannot establish whether the behaviour of parliamentarians corresponds to the wishes of the people who elected them. Finding out what voters want from their local MP will thus help us evaluate the health of our democracy.

Second, knowing more about constituents' expectations can also help us to understand whether the public harbour unrealistic expectations about what are appropriate activities for MPs. For example, voters may underestimate the parliamentary workload MPs face and expect them to spend almost all their time and energy on constituency service. Studying constituent preferences can show what voters see as the key and most desirable duties of MPs.

In a recent study, we therefore set out to measure what kinds of MPs British voters prefer. In an online experiment using a survey technique called conjoint analysis, we asked participants to choose a preferred representative from pairs of hypothetical MPs who varied in how they acted as representatives, but also in their gender, party and tenure in parliament. By observing participants' choices between different types of MP, we were able to infer which MP attributes voters value, and in what ways.

It may of course be that voters simply have no preferences or expectations regarding what their MP does. Many pay little attention even to national politics and may only have a vague idea about what MPs in fact do aside from their role as a party representative. In our study, we allowed for this possibility by offering participants the ability to choose between hypothetical MPs either randomly or based simply on party.

Yet we found that voters in fact do have clear preferences as to the individual attributes of their local MP. Voters prefer MPs who speak out against the party line and who represent the

wishes of constituents. They also want MPs to spend more than a minimal amount of time on constituency issues, preferring MPs who spend three days of a typical working week on constituency matters and two days working on national policy. Other characteristics such as an MP's experience or sex matter a lot less to voters.

Our study

For our study we chose to make use a technique which originated in marketing: choice-based conjoint analysis. In such surveys, participants are presented with two or more hypothetical options and are then asked which of these they prefer. The technique is often used in studies of consumers, where respondents have to indicate their preferred credit card scheme or smartphone. The key feature of conjoint analyses is that the choices with which respondents are presented have a broad range of characteristics and these characteristics vary randomly.

In our case, we presented survey participants with profiles of hypothetical MPs who varied in the following attributes: their independence from the party line, the source of their policy opinions and the time spent on constituency service and national policy work, as well as their gender, party and tenure in parliament. Our precise experimental design was as follows. After a short introduction, we asked respondents to consider a series of pairs of hypothetical MPs, each characterised by several attributes. For example, the MPs could be male or female, Conservative or Labour, or speak out against the party never, rarely, sometimes or often. Respondents were presented with a total of five choice tasks. Respondents' choices were measured by asking them which of the two persons described they would prefer to have as their representative. Figure 1 shows a screenshot of one of our surveys.

Figure 1 about here

Conjoint analysis has not previously been used to study what constituents want their parliamentary representatives to do. Existing survey research has generally asked respondents to rank different activities in terms of perceived importance. In Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina's pioneering study, for example, respondents were requested to rank various activities, including 'Protecting the interests of the constituency'; 'Keeping in touch with the people about what the government is doing'; 'Helping people in the constituency who have personal problems with the government'; 'Debating and voting in Parliament'; and 'Keeping track of civil servants'.[3] Another approach has been to ask survey participants to rate the importance of different activities. So, respondents might be asked to assign a score measuring how important they think it is that MPs spend time on constituency service. Finally, many surveys have also asked respondents to choose a preferred role for MPs. For instance, participants have been requested to decide whether, when deciding how to vote in parliament, MPs should follow their own conscience, the party line or the wishes of their constituency.

Each of these approaches is undoubtedly informative, but conjoint analyses have some important advantages. Because of their design, we can isolate the effect of different attributes. It might be, for example, that voters say they want their MP to spend time on constituency work because this also increases the likelihood that he or she will take constituency wishes into account when voting in parliament. By including various attributes in our hypothetical profiles, we can be more certain that we are capturing the effect of one specific attribute and not that of other, related characteristics. So, we can check whether voters simply view an attribute as a proxy for other MP characteristics.

Moreover, our design means that we can use the choices of respondents to understand which characteristics are seen as important and how each attribute affects decisions. For our study of MPs, this means that we can learn how much weight, if any, citizens place on different activities and attributes when asked to simultaneously consider other legislator attributes such as party affiliation, gender or work experience. So, we can test explanations for

voter preferences at the same time as examining whether voters have any preferences over a legislator attribute at all. If we instead asked respondents to rank or rate attributes, social desirability may make it less likely for respondents to choose to say that a characteristic is simply not important to them.

Another advantage of conjoint analyses is that respondents are not asked to assess individual activities or attributes in isolation. Instead, they are provided with relatively rounded and complex hypothetical profiles. This means that the choices are at least somewhat realistic, which means it is more likely that our findings will transfer to the 'real world' beyond the survey situation.

In sum, conjoint analyses enable us to measure preferences as to single aspects of representative behaviour while also embedding voters' choices in a multidimensional setting, which allows us to assess how important each aspect is relative to the other attributes of the representatives.

MP activities and behaviour

The first MP activity we examined in our study was independence from the party line. The extent to which MPs are loyal to their party is a key attribute of parliamentary representatives. There are many ways in which representatives can register their disagreement with the party line. Perhaps the most well-known among researchers and journalists is parliamentary rebellion, i.e. casting a vote in parliament that differs from that recommended by the party. Among political scientists, this has generally been the main way in which the independence of MPs has been measured, and rebellions can also receive a lot of coverage in the media. Nowadays, interested constituents can look up how their MP voted on websites such as theyworkforyou.com. Nevertheless, parliamentary voting is just one way in which MPs can register their disagreement: for example, they can also sign critical Early Day Motions or speak out in the media or at public meetings.

What might constituents expect from their MP in terms of political independence? We think it is very likely that constituents are highly in favour of independent MPs.[4] For one, parties are very unpopular in Britain, so any action that distances MPs from parties will be viewed positively. By acting independently, MPs can signal that they have principles and are trustworthy, so constituents may see speaking out against the party as an indication of other positive candidate characteristics.

However, not all constituents may support parliamentary independence. Those MPs who speak out too much may be seen as troublesome meddlers, especially if they rebel against a party the constituent supports. A diehard Conservative supporter's approval of Tory rebels will have its limits. The reason why the MP is speaking out may also be important: is this in favour of policies I support or that benefit my constituency?

In our study, we measured *independence from the party line* in two ways. In our first survey, we stated how often the hypothetical MP speaks out or votes against the party leadership: never, rarely, sometimes or often. In our second survey, our fictional parliamentarians differed in whether they spoke out behind closed doors or also in public. Real-world representatives may often decide to speak out only privately. Many parties allow such private dissent, and it is an important way in which legislators can try to influence the party line. Thus, our hypothetical MPs could: not speak out; speak out only at internal party meetings; or speak out both at such meetings and also publicly.

A related attribute of MPs is when they decide to be independent. In our second study, we therefore also measured the *source of policy opinions*, where we stated whether, when considering policy matters, the hypothetical MP thinks about his or her own views or those of his or her constituents. This is related to an important question concerning the preferred representational role of MPs. When making decisions, should they follow their own conscience (thus acting as 'trustees') or the wishes of their constituents ('delegates')?

In addition to independence from the party line, a second fundamental decision that

every legislator makes is over the allocation of limited resources in terms of time and energy to national policy work and constituency service, respectively. It is well known that the dual role of a parliamentary representative creates important tensions. In the United States, Fenno noted the conflict between the need to work on matters of national policy and to help constituents with important requests.[5] Surveys of legislators have provided researchers with good-quality information on how MPs tend to address this trade-off. For example, recent evidence shows that British MPs spend about fourteen hours per week on constituency work, which is more than MPs in most other European countries, including Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway and Spain.[6]

Again, we know far less about how constituents would like MPs to address the trade-off; indeed, we know less about this than about expectations concerning independence. However, our expectation when we began our study was that constituents would want high levels of constituency service. Distrust of parties and Parliament is high, so voters might prefer their MP to be involved in hands-on work supporting the constituency.[7] Constituents who are relatively informed about how Westminster works will also know that MPs generally do not have much individual influence on legislation, so they might prefer their MP to be active in ways where he or she will be more likely to make a difference, so in the constituency. In doing so, MPs might do more to help the constituent or affect the situation in the constituency than if they focused on legislative policy-making.

In both surveys, we therefore stated the amount of *time spent on constituency or national policy work* by the hypothetical MPs. This captures how the MP allocates effort to each of the two activities. This was measured by stating the number of days of a five-day week spent working on local constituency issues, with the remaining days spent reviewing and working on national policies in Parliament. This formulation makes the trade-off between the two types of activity explicit while not presenting either in an obviously positive light.

In addition to an MP's independence from the party and their time spent on constituency versus Westminster activities, we also presented respondents with information on other MP attributes.

We also varied the *party affiliation* of the MPs (Labour or Conservative). This is one MP characteristic about which voters are likely to have very strong preferences. For Labour supporters, the key thing about an MP might be that he or she is also Labour-affiliated. Indeed, party affiliation may overpower any other attribute of an MP, making it a key characteristic to include in our descriptions of hypothetical MPs. We also varied the *gender* of the hypothetical MPs to examine whether voters had a bias toward having a male or female representative. Finally, we varied the *tenure in parliament* of the hypothetical MPs (three, ten or twenty-one years) to examine whether voters preferred to have an experienced representative, all else equal.

Our first survey was fielded between 5 and 6 December 2012 to 1,899 respondents. The second was fielded between 24 and 25 September 2013 to 1,919 respondents. For both surveys, YouGov drew a sub-sample from its online panel of over 360,000 British adults, ensuring the sample was representative of British adults in terms of age, gender, social class and type of newspaper readership.

Findings

Our findings are presented graphically in Figure 2, which shows the effect of different levels of each attribute on the probability of choosing a hypothetical MP. The note under the Figure explains in more detail how it should be interpreted.

Figure 2 about here

In detail, the results are as follows:

Independence from the party line: We find that voters like MPs who disagree with the party leadership. Those MPs who rarely speak out or vote against the party are about 13 per cent more likely to be chosen by respondents than those who never do so, while those who do so sometimes or often are more than 30 per cent more likely to be chosen. Public disagreement is valued more than raising concerns privately. Those MPs who speak out internally are almost 15 per cent more likely to be chosen than those who do not speak out at all, while those MPs who speak out internally *and* publicly are more than 20 per cent more likely to be chosen than MPs who do not voice their opposition at all.

Source of policy opinions: Voters clearly prefer MPs who represent the wishes of constituents over those who follow their own beliefs and principles. MPs who think about their constituents' views are more than 20 per cent more likely to be chosen than MPs who think about their own views.

Time spent on constituency or national policy work: Constituents want their parliamentary representative to work hard—but not exclusively—on local constituency issues. MPs who spend three days on constituency work and two days on national policy are preferred most. However, all MPs who spend at least two days on constituency work are strongly preferred to those who just spend one day a week on that activity. This was measured in both surveys and the patterns are almost identical.

Gender: There is no clear effect of the gender of the MP: neither male nor female MPs are clearly preferred in survey 1, while a woman MP is slightly preferred in survey 2.

Tenure in parliament: The effect of parliamentary experience is small at most, with MPs with twenty-one years in parliament slightly preferred over those who have been in parliament for just three years.

Party: Labour MPs are slightly preferred to Conservative MPs, in line with poll results at the time of the surveys. In analyses we do not show here, we also find that, unsurprisingly, Labour and Conservative supporters strongly prefer the MP to be from their own party.

Implications

Our study shows that voters care about more than just the party label of their MP. Instead, we now have evidence that constituents distinguish between types of activity and can say how they prefer their MP to behave. Specifically, it appears that citizens want MPs who are not beholden to the party line but who demonstrate individuality. MPs who represent constituency preferences are viewed more positively than those who evaluate policies based more on their own personal principles. Finally, constituents want their MP to work hard to represent their constituency, but not to such an extent that national policy work is not valued.

In sum, constituents want a Parliament that is made up of strong-minded, independent MPs who see themselves mainly as representatives of their constituency. Such a Parliament would of course weaken the role of national political parties, who depend on a strong, unified party line to implement their political promises. This presents an important dilemma for party leaders. On the one hand, encouraging their MPs to demonstrate their independence might increase the popularity of the party in the constituency and thus its electoral chances. On the other, such a group of MPs would make it a lot harder to push through political change and present a unified programme to voters. Homogenous national parties are important to enable voters to choose between alternative governments, not just between different constituency candidates.

In the end, there are thus limits to the extent to which parties can and perhaps should let their MPs be independent. This means that the expectations of voters are perhaps not reconcilable with the current British institutional arrangements. The only solutions available are to change these institutional arrangements (unlikely) or to communicate more effectively why party loyalty may be necessary for effective and efficient governing (difficult). In the end, we may simply have to accept a certain level of voter dissatisfaction with the party loyalty of MPs.

In contrast, when it comes to MPs' time spent on constituency and national policy work, our study also shows that voters are more realistic in their expectations. Their preference is for a three-day/two-day split between the two activities. This in fact matches the average time allocation of the 2010 intake of MPs, who, in a recent study by the Hansard Society, reported spending 60 per cent of their time on constituency work and 40 per cent on Westminster work.[8]

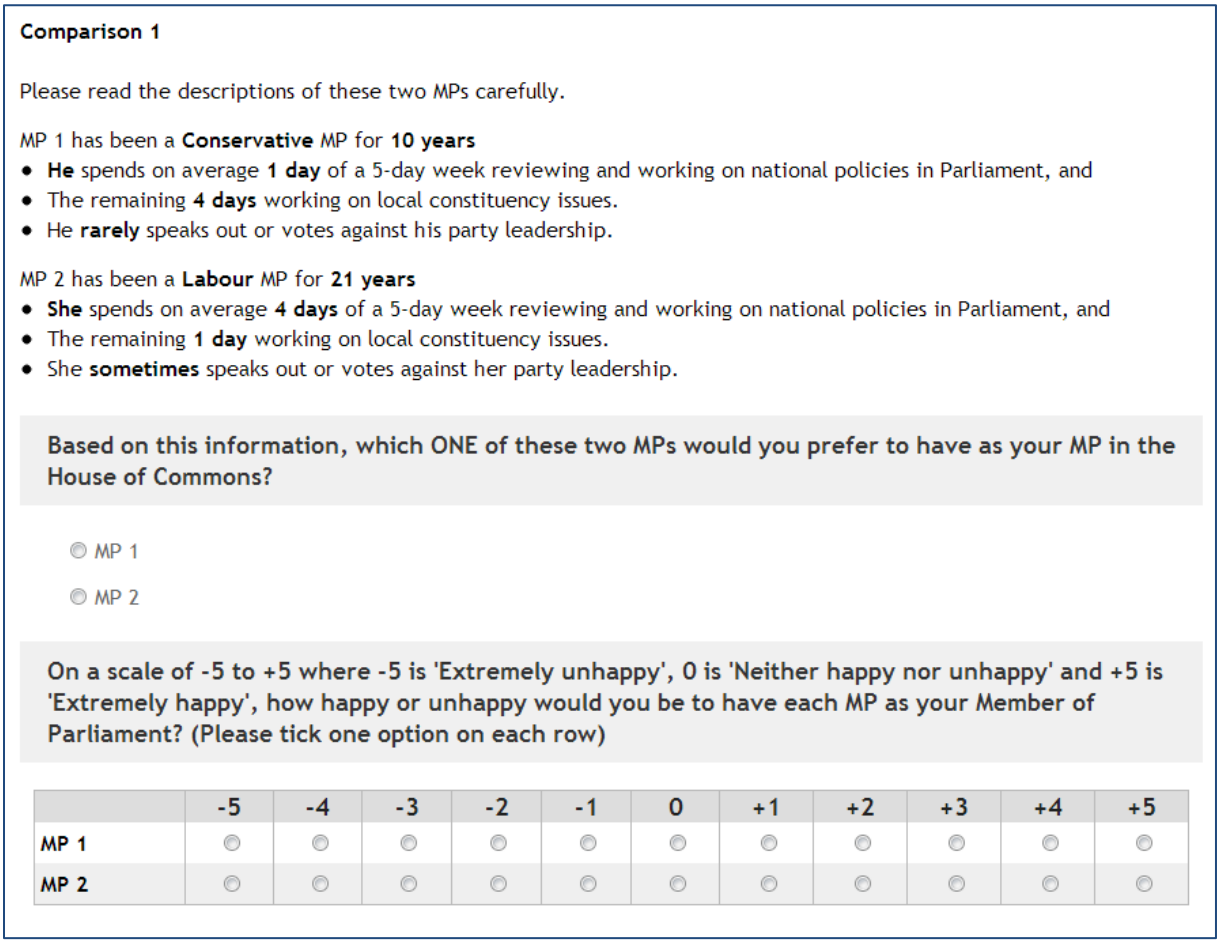
In our experiments, we looked at how respondents react to different types of MPs in simplified scenarios. This means that our findings cannot be directly applied to choices at the ballot box. At election time, vote choice may be more influenced by partisan considerations and by concerns about who should lead the government. Moreover, we provided very clear information to our respondents about MP characteristics, and this is not always as easily available in real-world situations.

However, even if the magnitude of the effects of MPs' activities is likely to be smaller in an election, our results tell us *how* each MP attribute may affect vote choice. For example, voters are unlikely to reward an almost exclusive focus on constituency service more than a moderate focus on that activity. The Westminster work of an MP is not unpopular per se, as long it does not become the sole activity of the MP. We also have evidence that moderately independent MPs are seen almost as positively as very independent ones. So, our survey gives

us more information about what voters want than we could glean simply from looking at and comparing election results and the profiles and activities of MPs.

Finally, there is still more work to be done on what voters want from their MPs. To simplify the design of our experiments, we have used comparisons between two sitting MPs. A more realistic situation is that voters have to choose between an incumbent and a challenger, and future studies could look at which information and characteristics voters then make use of. Furthermore, there are many other MP attributes to consider. For instance, candidates for office differ in their local roots and social background, attributes we have ignored in this study. In other words, there is still more to discover about what kinds of candidates and MPs voters want.

Figure 1: Screenshot from the conjoint analysis study



Comparison 1

Please read the descriptions of these two MPs carefully.

MP 1 has been a **Conservative** MP for **10 years**

- **He** spends on average **1 day** of a 5-day week reviewing and working on national policies in Parliament, and
- The remaining **4 days** working on local constituency issues.
- He **rarely** speaks out or votes against his party leadership.

MP 2 has been a **Labour** MP for **21 years**

- **She** spends on average **4 days** of a 5-day week reviewing and working on national policies in Parliament, and
- The remaining **1 day** working on local constituency issues.
- She **sometimes** speaks out or votes against her party leadership.

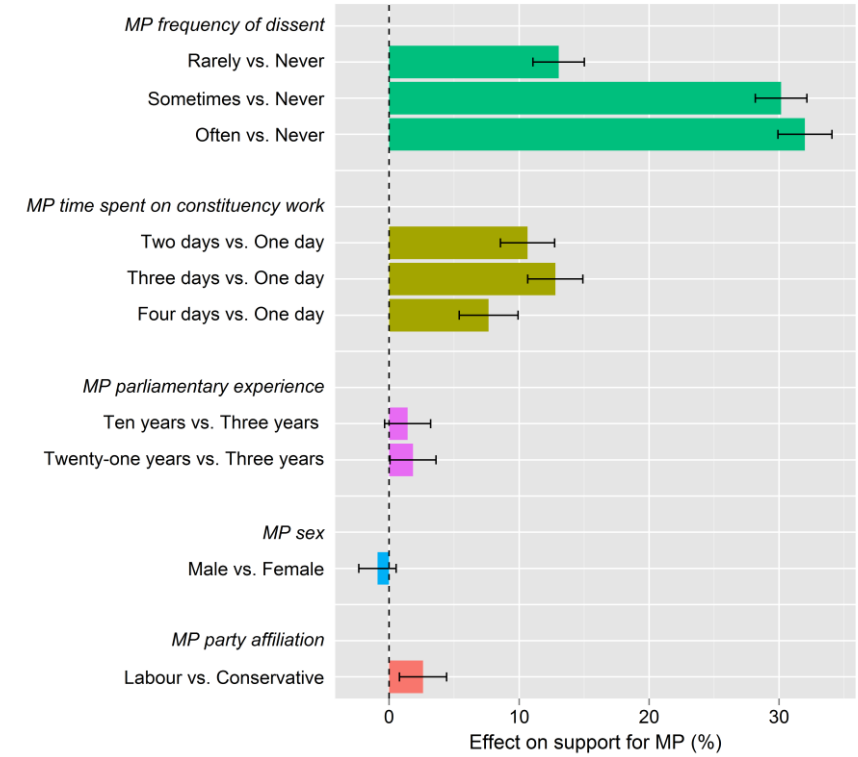
Based on this information, which ONE of these two MPs would you prefer to have as your MP in the House of Commons?

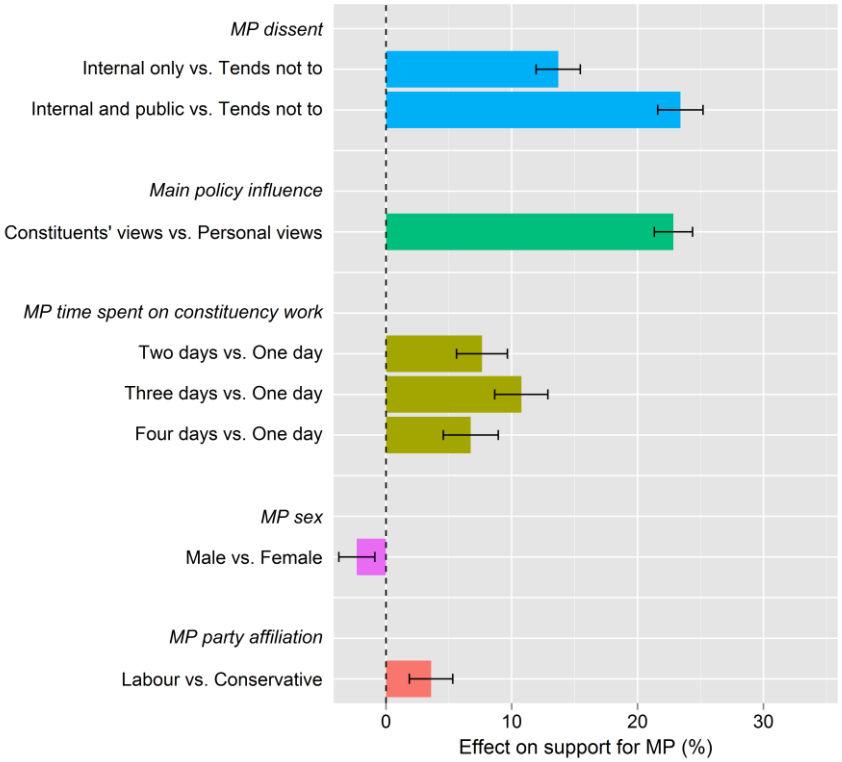
- MP 1
- MP 2

On a scale of -5 to +5 where -5 is 'Extremely unhappy', 0 is 'Neither happy nor unhappy' and +5 is 'Extremely happy', how happy or unhappy would you be to have each MP as your Member of Parliament? (Please tick one option on each row)

	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3	+4	+5
MP 1											
MP 2											

Figure 2: Survey results





Note: These plots show the results of the two studies. MP attributes are listed down the left hand side of each plot. Each bar compares the support for MPs with one level of an attribute versus those with another level of the attribute. For example, the top bar in the left-hand plot shows that respondents were 13 per cent more likely to choose an MP who ‘rarely’ dissents against his or her party than an MP who ‘never’ does so. The black lines show the margin of error for each comparison. If the black line crosses zero, we cannot be confident that there is any difference in levels of support for the two types of MP.

1 This research was funded by a British Academy Small Grant.
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